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# Tuesday Reflection

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# Tuesday Reflection - January 14, 2014

January 14, 2014 | Ascension Chapel

**Steven C. Bahls, President**

My New Year's resolution: I'll receive no more nasty emails!

Scripture: James 1:19-20. *"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."*

If there is one thing I have learned in my 23 years as a senior administrator in higher education is that I, like other college presidents, am a magnet for nasty emails, angry letters, blog posts and insistent face to face interactions. Some are one-line zingers, others are multi-page diatribes.

So I decided for 2014 and would address this problem with a New Year's Resolution: In 2014, I will receive no more nasty emails or condescending letters. There will be no more nasty blog posts or editorials about me. You heard me correctly. December 31, 2013, was the last day I received any nasty communication.

How can that be? Simply put: "Nasty" is in the eyes of the beholder. That's right, if I don't regard an email as nasty, then, to me, it will not be nasty. Instead, I will regard these emails, letters and calls as evidence of strong passions. And usually these strong passions are outward signs of deep love and respect for Augustana - even though they may lead the holder of those passions to conclusions other than my own.

Let me give you a few examples. I remember the first email - which prior to 2014 I might have regarded as nasty - that I received from a faculty member who was frustrated about collapsing enrollment in his classes. The email said that I was a "bean counter." As some of you know, my undergraduate degree is in accounting and I am a CPA. At first, I thought it could be a compliment. Perhaps he was saying I was good at keeping the colleges finances strong. But the academic dean informed me it's wasn't a compliment. The faculty member was saying I cared more about the college being financially viable than the courses he wanted to teach to tiny classes. He was passionate about his subject and upset that students were not.

So this year, instead of getting upset about emails like this, I will take them as evidence that people care deeply about what they do and are passionate about the college. I will be patient and keep lines of communication open. I will understand that these emails are sent out of frustration with the sender's situation, which usually has little to do with me as a person.

This professor's email was not isolated.

Cases in point were my decisions to permit blessings of same gender civil unions and now weddings in this chapel and to encourage readings from the Koran at our Baccalaureate worship service before graduation. I expected a torrent of nasty communications, but received only a few. Several told me they would never donate another dollar to Augustana. One told me he would donate in only Muslim dollars — whatever those are. Many

told me that I was turning my back on Christianity and the college's Lutheran identity — never mind that both decisions actually emanated from our Lutheran identity. Though I have a thick skin — all leaders must — some of these comments have been frustrating and hurtful.

So recently, when I receive unfair comments like this, I take a different approach:

- First, I make the choice not to become frustrated, hurt or angry.
- Second, I understand that these comments say more about the person making the comment than they do about me. People making these comments are usually grieving some loss. The loss of their world view that same-sex couples are evil or that people of different religions are evil. Or in the professor's case, that he was offering classes that students were, by-and-large, not interested in.
- Third, these people are passionate about Augustana. Now, since passions are woven from our own stories, they are woven from our past. And that means these passions are most often about the way Augustana was or the way we remember it to be. Those are two distinct things, but both are different from the Augustana of today, just as the world in which Augustana operates and to which it is accountable has changed. And yet these passions, born of yesterday, result in fervent feeling for the Augustana of today.
- Fourth, I try — in most cases — to start a dialog. The person who told me his donation was going to be in Muslim dollars was shocked when I called him. "Sven (I have changed the name), what do you mean by Muslim dollars? Where are you going to get them? Did you really mean that? Did you know the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was also part of the service and that it was a beautiful celebration of our students? Did you know the Lutheran expression of higher education is to reach out to people of all beliefs, challenging them to deepen their faith?" Did I change his mind? Probably not. Will he be more introspective about the issue in the future? Perhaps. Will he be more careful before he fires off angry letters? I'd like to think so.
- Finally, I will not be intimidated by those who send these emails. Yes, some are bullies. Most are simply wearing their emotions on their shirtsleeves. I will not let attempts to intimidate cause me to lose my integrity or act in a way that is not in the best long-term interest of Augustana.

Most of you here in chapel today are leaders or are becoming leaders. This means you are, or will be, magnets for criticism, some fair and some unfair. You will receive, in this less civil society, too many uncivil, condescending or overly aggressive emails, letters, blog posts and other communications. But how you react to them is your choice. It is your decision to escalate or engage.

Or you could rise above it. You could choose, as I resolve to chose, to view overaggressive statements as evidence of passionate people, whose passions guide them in directions other than your own. And you could view it as an opportunity for dialog and — who knows? — maybe even a change in your position.

The advice from the Book of James is correct: *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

Thank you for the opportunity to share my resolution with you.

Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
		& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies